

The Co-Creation of Caring Student-Teacher Relationships: Does Teacher Understanding Matter?

Kristy S. Cooper
Michigan State University
kcooper@msu.edu

Andrew Miness
Michigan State University
minessan@msu.edu

This study explores the role of high school students' perceptions of teacher understanding in the development of caring student-teacher relationships. Whereas past research has embedded understanding as a facet of care, this research distinguishes between care and understanding to examine whether and how understanding is necessary for care. Extending Noddings' (1992) conceptions of caring as virtue and caring as relation to consider understanding as virtue and understanding as relation, the researchers analyzed 33 interviews with high school students discussing 65 student-teacher relationships to consider the nuances within these different types of relationships. The findings confirm that caring as relation is the more desirable form of teacher care and that in most instances of relational caring, students perceive that teachers understand them both as people and learners. However, this is not uniformly the case, and many students perceive agency in co-creating their relationships with teachers by regulating the extent to which they allow teachers to understand them. The researchers recommend greater attention to the development of understanding as virtue within high schools as a middle ground between a complete lack of understanding and extensive relational understanding. This research has implications for teachers and school leaders seeking to foster stronger student-teacher relationships.

Student-teacher relationships have a large impact on students' social and emotional experiences in schools, primarily because such relationships influence students' perceptions of connection and belonging (Osterman, 2010). Indeed, students' need to connect with teachers is central to the movement for greater personalization of high schools, which argues for increased utilization of structures – e.g., advisories, looping, teaching teams, and smaller teaching loads – that can facilitate strong student-teacher relationships (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Klem & Connell, 2004; McClure, Yonezawa, & Jones, 2010). Researchers have repeatedly documented the centrality of care in positive student-teacher relationships, such that students feel more connected to teachers whom they perceive care about them academically and personally (Altenbaugh, Engel, & Martin, 1995; Garza, 2009; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Schussler & Collins, 2006). In her influential theoretical work on the importance of care in schools, Noddings (1992, 2005) identified the main problem with schools as their inability to promote caring and asserted that caring relationships lead to interpersonal trust and are the basis for moral and individualized education. By providing students with

caring relationships, and by affirming students' positive behavior, Noddings posited that teachers facilitate the growth of "healthy, competent, moral people" (2005, p. 10). Noddings theorized that perceptions of caring take two forms: *caring as relation* and *caring as virtue*, with relational care being more authentic and meaningful. Noddings also argued that relational caring requires "motivational displacement" (p. 15), in which the carer *understands* and adopts the cared-for's point of view. Others have similarly positioned teacher understanding as foundational to caring student-teacher relationships (e.g., Certo, Cauley, & Chafin, 2003; Garza, 2009; Mayeroff, 1971; Osterman, 2010).

However, the extent to which understanding is necessary for students to perceive teacher care and the exact nature of teacher understanding that most effectively supports caring student-teacher relationships has not been examined empirically. Conceptually, caring and understanding could be reciprocal, such that a teacher who cares about students tries to understand them *and* that a high level of understanding in turn gives teachers the information they need in order to care more effectively. It is also conceivable, however, that teachers could care about students yet not realize that they could offer better care if they knew students better, or they might not have structures in place to get to know students. Alternatively, teachers may care for students yet not feel it is appropriate to know students well. Indeed, the distinction between care and understanding is nuanced, and the existing literature is not clear on how these two facets of student-teacher relationships relate to one another. Certainly, insight into the role and nature of understanding in caring student-teacher relationships could provide concrete goals for personalization of high schools, such that teachers could focus their increased time with individual students on developing and demonstrating the type of understanding that would most effectively support students' feelings of connection and belonging. Thus, in this study, we seek to examine the distinction and explore the relationship between care and understanding in order to consider whether and how these two facets of student-teacher relationships function together and separately to influence students' classroom experiences.

We argue that student-teacher relationships are formed through co-creation in which both parties possess agency in shaping the nature of each relationship. As we will illustrate, teachers cannot simply understand their students because they want to or because they attempt to understand them. Students possess agency that enables them to moderate how teachers understand who they are by regulating the degree to which they allow teachers to know personal details about them. In this study, we focused on this co-creation of student-teacher relationships from the students' vantage point. Analyzing interviews with 33 students in grades 9–12 as they discuss 65 different student-teacher relationships, we used Noddings' (1992) theoretical conceptions of caring as relation and caring as virtue to distinguish among different types of caring student-teacher relationships and then examined exactly how teacher understanding of students fit into students' perceptions of various relationships. In doing so, we strove to provide insight into the nuances of caring and understanding in student-teacher relationships and to identify specific teacher actions and dispositions that convey the most engaging forms of care and understanding.

The Need for Relatedness and Belonging in High School

Theory and research assert that a sense of relatedness in the classroom is fundamental to students feeling a high level of engagement, motivation, and attachment to classrooms and schools, which in turn can foster high levels of persistence, achievement, and attainment (Connell, 1990; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Finn, 1989; Hallinan, 2008; Martin & Dowson, 2009; National Research Council, 2004; Rumberger, 2011;

Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this conceptualization, relatedness is defined as the need for belonging and for secure interpersonal connection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Osterman (2010) noted that research consistently identifies teachers as having the most powerful impact on students' psychological experiences in classrooms. She asserted that relatedness between students and teachers is critical because of its power to communicate worth, respect, and care to students. Students who experience a positive student-teacher relationship with a particular teacher tend to experience higher levels of belonging in that teacher's class and in school more broadly as compared with students who do not experience such positive relationships. Such belonging influences students' positive school orientations, which are linked to higher levels of motivation and engagement (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993; Nichols, 2008; Osterman, 2000, 2010) and to stronger academic outcomes, such as higher attendance and better grades (Nichols, 2008; Osterman, 2010; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). Consequently, a lack of belonging in schools and classrooms is associated with an increased possibility that students will experience psychological problems, behavioral issues, and stress, and a stronger likelihood that a student will drop out of school (Osterman, 2000; Rumberger, 2011). For example, Altenbaugh, Engel, and Martin (1995) examined the experiences of 100 students who decided to stop going to school and found that these students left because they experienced teachers as uncaring and schools as alienating. In fact, research consistently finds that many students drop out because of weak student-teacher relationships and pervasive feelings of anonymity and alienation in school (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Fine, 1991; Finn, 1989; National Research Council, 2004; Rumberger, 2011).

Despite the importance of relatedness and belonging in classrooms and schools, the current structures in many schools offer minimal opportunity for students to experience connection with their teachers. In an ethnographic analysis of caring among young students in a second-grade classroom, Noblit (1993) noted students' need to connect with their teacher as "the saddest part of classroom life" (p. 33). He described the teacher's dilemma in this regard: "There is an insatiable demand for attention and connection, and in some ways every decision to connect with one child is a decision to not connect with another" (p. 33). If such tradeoffs are experienced in the small, self-contained classrooms of second grade, then the high school teacher's inability to establish connections with the ever-rotating series of students coming through their classroom in a school day is even more distressing. This pervasive absence of connection is central to the call for greater personalization in high schools, which emphasizes structures that enable students and teachers to develop relationships over increased and extended time together. Prominent personalization practices include advisories, where students meet regularly in small groups with an assigned adult advisor; looping, which is when teachers work with the same students over subsequent school years; teaching teams, when a group of teachers share the same students and collaborate around serving those students well; and smaller teaching loads that enable teachers to create stronger connections with students because they have fewer students to get to know (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Klem & Connell, 2004; Mac Iver, 2011; McClure, Yonezawa, & Jones, 2010). Throughout this literature, the theory behind personalization is that enabling teachers to get to know their students through increased time together will serve as a conduit for teachers and students to develop caring, trusting relationships that will foster students' belonging, connection, and engagement with school.

However, simply spending time together does not mean that students and teachers will develop meaningful relationships. It is entirely possible that students and

teachers can work together for four years and maintain superficial relationships that do not support increased student attachment to school. This possibility highlights the need for greater understanding as to the *nature* of those student-teacher relationships that students describe as the most significant. Noddings (1992, 2005) argued that such relationships are based on teachers conveying care toward students and understanding of students as individuals in order to create more authentic interpersonal connections.

Teacher Care and Understanding

Students' perceptions of teacher care are a central means by which they develop emotional connections to classrooms and teachers (Garrett, Barr, & Rothman, 2009; Schussler & Collins, 2006). Noblit, Rogers, and McCadden (1995) described caring as "the glue that binds teachers and students together and makes life in classrooms meaningful" (p. 681). We define teacher care as the teacher's concern for students' wellbeing, and we position care as an orientation that teachers hold toward students and that they express through various actions and dispositions. Caring student-teacher relationships are vital for the academic outcomes they can foster, such as engagement, and for the positive pro-social impact they can have on students (Noddings, 1992, 2005; Osterman, 2000, 2010). Scholars have found caring student-teacher relationships to foster attentiveness and conscientiousness (Davidson, 1999), cooperation and altruism (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997), and positive attitudes toward the self and others (Osterman, 2010).

Research on caring in schools has identified specific teacher behaviors and ways of being that students perceive as conveying care. This work finds that students identify care in teachers' respect and encouragement, help with academic work, frequent interactions, equal and fair treatment across students, positive approaches to discipline and classroom management, and assistance with personal problems (Cothran & Ennis, 2000; Davidson, 1999; Garrett, Barr, & Rothman, 2009; Osterman, 2010). In longitudinal research with forty-nine urban high school students facing cultural barriers in school, Davidson (1999) found two primary ways in which teachers communicate care: (a) by learning about who students are as people through discussing their lives with them, and (b) by conferring with students regularly regarding their academic progress.

As is suggested by Davidson's (1999) first finding, many researchers on care incorporate understanding another person as foundational to caring for that individual (Mayeroff, 1971; Noddings, 1992, 2005; Schussler & Collins, 2006). Such work posits that teachers who understand their students are better positioned to convey genuine caring. Laying the foundation for this line of reasoning, Mayeroff (1971) argued that care involves the construction of a relationship predicated on responsiveness, trust, devotion, and knowledge. Mayeroff also argued that caring is not simply the product of good intentions by a caring individual, but rather a consistent, strategic process aimed at helping another person grow. Similarly, Hansen (2008) linked the deliberate efforts of teachers to understand students individually on intellectual and moral levels to being able to better serve them. In a classroom, then, being informed regarding a student's personality, desires, needs, and learning style could enhance a teacher's capacity to advance that student's goals and abilities to reach these goals. Indeed, similar to Davidson's (1999) finding, Schussler (2009) posited that students are more engaged in classrooms when they feel that teachers know and value them as people. Others have also conceptualized teachers knowing students as a sub-construct within teacher care (e.g., Certo, Cauley, & Chafin, 2003; Garza, 2009; Osterman, 2010).

In this study, we diverged from these works that conflate care and understanding to distinguish care and understanding as two separate entities—using *teacher care* to denote the teacher's feelings of concern for a student's wellbeing and *teacher understanding* to denote the extent to which the teacher knows who the student is as a person. We operationalize these constructs through interviews by asking students how much they think a particular teacher cares about them, and then how much they think that teacher understands who they “really are as a person.” In our conceptualization, developed through previous interviews and surveys with high school students (Cooper, 2012, 2014), these two perceptions of teachers' orientations toward students can occur together or separately. Indeed, as we illustrate below, we interviewed numerous students who stated that a particular teacher cared for them but did not understand them. In such accounts, students typically interpreted teacher caring as the teacher looking out for their wellbeing and wanting good things for them, and teacher understanding as the teacher knowing them and acknowledging them as individuals with specific perspectives, needs, traits, and personalities. In these ways, teacher care and understanding are conceptualized as orientations towards students that teachers express through particular actions and dispositions in the classroom.

Theoretical Framework

We draw our theoretical framework from two works that distinguish among forms of teacher care. The first is Noddings' (2005) delineation of caring as relation and caring as virtue. In describing *caring as relation*, Noddings emphasized the *relationship* between someone who offers care (the “carer”) and someone who receives care (the “cared-for”). She noted that caring as relation is a mutual exchange in which the cared-for accepts the carer's offer of care. By contrast, Noddings described *caring as virtue* as occurring when the characteristic of “being caring” is ascribed to the carer, even in the absence of a caring exchange between the two individuals. Noddings argued that caring as relation is the more authentic and desirable form because it requires the carer to experience motivational displacement, such that the carer understands and then momentarily adopts the needs of the cared-for. In our present use of caring as relation, we retain Noddings' relational dimension by focusing on the exchange between two individuals, but we separate out the notion that the carer must understand the cared-for in order to have such an exchange. As such, we extrapolate from Noddings' (2005) conceptualization of caring to consider understanding as relation and understanding as virtue. We use *understanding as relation* to denote a relationship in which the student perceives that the teacher knows them as an individual due to a relational exchange between the teacher and student. By contrast, we conceive *understanding as virtue* to describe relationships in which students consider a teacher to “be understanding” by nature, even if they have not experienced an exchange in which the teacher appeared to know them individually. This distinction is similar to that made by Hansen (2008), in which he identified moral and intellectual attentiveness as two components integral to teachers understanding students. In our model, moral attentiveness is akin to the more substantive, personal nature of *understanding as relation*, whereas intellectual attentiveness is akin to the more removed, impersonal *understanding as virtue*. Hansen (2008) argued that both moral and intellectual attentiveness help foster positive relationships with students, but that persistent efforts to understand the child from a moral standpoint create the most significant relationships.

Our second theoretical distinction comes from Schussler and Collins (2006) who differentiate between academic and personal care. They describe *academic care* as

teachers providing academic assistance so students can learn, get good grades, graduate, and achieve success later in life. By contrast, *personal care* focuses on students' general wellbeing and their overall development as people. As with Noddings' (2005), we extend Schussler and Collins' distinction to our analysis of understanding and explore teachers' understanding of students academically and personally. As such, we consider *academic understanding* to be a teacher's knowledge of a student's learning style, strengths and weaknesses in the classroom, and academic ambitions, whereas we consider *personal understanding* to be the teacher's knowledge of the student's personality, interests, and life outside of school.

Some research has identified racial and ethnic differences in students' interpretations of teacher care along academic and personal dimensions, yet there are conflicting findings. Bosworth (1995), for example, found that, among just over 100 middle school students, students of color were more likely than their white peers to interpret teacher care from the standpoint of personal care, while white students were more likely to conceive of teacher care as being academic. Similarly, in Davidson's (1999) study of 49 students who were racially and ethnically different from their teachers, she found that Latino and African American students reported the most positive experiences in classrooms where teachers made personal connections with them, suggesting that a personal form of care was more significant for these students of color as compared with academic care. By contrast, Garza (2009) examined perceptions of teacher care among 49 Latino students and 44 white students and found that Latino students most frequently described care through teacher scaffolding, an academic support, whereas white students most frequently interpreted teacher care as kindness, a personal dimension. Garrett, Barr, and Rothman (2009) found that among 155 Latino, African American, and white students in the sixth and ninth grades, *all* were more likely to cite teacher caring as including academic rather than personal support, but that students of color were most likely to emphasize academic care. Despite conflicting findings over the form of care that is most meaningful to students of different races and ethnicities, numerous scholars have asserted that teachers' ability and willingness to care for all students and to care about the learning of all students are both critical for academic success among diverse student groups (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995; McClure, Yonezawa, & Jones, 2010). Although the primary focus of our research is how students perceive teacher care and understanding, we also consider patterns by race and ethnicity.

Research Questions

To examine the nuances in how students perceive teacher care and understanding and to delineate the relationship between these two constructs, we addressed four research questions. These questions enabled us to focus first on different types of caring student-teacher relationships and then on the ways in which students perceive understanding as functioning within those different types of caring relationships:

- How do high school students' perceptions of teacher care reflect the theoretical distinction between 'caring as relation' and 'caring as virtue'?
- How do these differences in students' perceptions of teacher care relate to students' sense that teachers understand them?
- What are the primary differences in teacher actions and dispositions among these different types of student-teacher relationships?
- Are there any racial or ethnic patterns in students' perceptions of teacher care and understanding?

Research Methods

Site and Participant Selection

This work comes from a larger study on student perceptions in grades 9–12 at Riley High School¹, a large comprehensive high school in a small town located about thirty minutes outside a large city in Texas. Riley is a typical Texas high school with a racially and socioeconomically diverse student body of 1,420 students who identify as 42% white, 36% Latino, 9% black, 10% mixed race, and 0.3% Asian. Riley does moderately well on state exams, has a graduation rate only slightly higher than the national average, and offers a traditional selection of academic and elective courses. In December 2009, the larger study surveyed the student body of Riley High School and received 1,132 responses (an 80% response rate). The survey asked students to report on their perceptions and engagement in each of their classes, for a total of 6,842 class-level reports. Among the survey items were one on teacher care (“How much do you feel like this teacher cares about you?”) and one on teacher understanding (“How much do you feel like this teacher understands who you really are?”). Students answered both items using a Likert scale with five response anchors ranging from “Not at All” to “Very Much.” Students’ reports on these two items had a high correlation of 0.76, revealing that students tended to answer these two items similarly. However, the fact that this correlation is not a perfect 1.00 demonstrates that there is some nuance in how students see these two constructs and that there are cases in which students report high levels of one construct but not the other.

From the survey results, five classes were identified as “instrumental case studies” (Stake, 1995) for exploring survey constructs, including care and understanding, because they represented different combinations of high and low results on various portions of the survey. Four of the five case study classes – Mr. Knowles’ physics class, Mr. Lifsky’s history class, Ms. Warner’s physics class, and Coach Connor’s English class – had surveys that revealed perceptions of care and understanding at various points above the school mean (ranging from 0.12 to 1.30 standard deviations above the mean on care and from 0.05 to 0.73 standard deviations above the mean on understanding), while the fifth class – Ms. Ingels’ biology class – was an anomaly in which students experienced above average levels of care (0.15) but below average levels of understanding (-0.25). Because we wanted to understand variations in care and understanding, we identified case study classrooms where these phenomena *did* occur and so did not include any case study classes in which both care and understanding were below the school mean.

From each case study class, we selected six to eight students to participate in interviews. In selecting interviewees, we used classroom observations to employ maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002) along dimensions of gender, race, engagement, peer group, and personality. Thus, at least two 90-minute observations in each case study class were conducted before student recruitment began. In total, we interviewed thirty-three students (fourteen male and nineteen female) spanning grades 9–12 and representing the school’s racial diversity (twelve white, eleven Latino, five black, four mixed-race, and one Asian). Table 1 provides an overview of the interviewees.

During interviews, students discussed their case study classes and teachers. They were also asked to contrast their case study class with one or more *comparison classes*, which were other classes in which they were enrolled and which served

Table 1: Overview of the 33 student interviewees.

Student	Grade	Race	Gender	Teachers Discussed
Ana	11	Latina	female	Warner
Arielle	10	white	female	Lifsky, McCoy, Wilson
Belinda	9	Latina	female	Ingels, Roller, Sanders
Brian	9	white	male	Ingels, Scott
Brianna	11	black/white	female	Warner, Dexter
Caesar	11	Latino	male	Warner, Brown
Carmen	11	Latina	female	Knowles, Dexter
Carter	9	Asian	male	Ingels, Scott, Sanders
Chris	11	Latino	male	Lifsky, Turner
Christine	11	black/white	female	Knowles, Dexter
Claire	9	white	female	Ingels, Roman
Davon	11	black	male	Warner, Dexter
Isabel	11	Latina	female	Warner
Jack	11	white	male	Warner, Andrews
Javier	12	Latino	male	Warner
Jeremy	11	white	male	Knowles, Andrews
Jessica	10	Latina	female	Lifsky, Newman
Kiana	11	black	female	Connor, Wilson
Laura	11	white	female	Connor, Parker, Knowles
Marianne	9	white	female	Ingels
Mia	11	black	female	Connor, Jenkins
Mike	10	white	male	Lifsky, Sanders
Pete	11	white	male	Knowles, Connor
Rachel	10	Latina/white	female	Lifsky, Sanders, Lopez
Ray	11	white	male	Knowles, Dexter
Roberto	9	Latino	male	Ingels, Sanders
Roxana	9	Latina	female	Ingels, Moore
Rubi	11	Latina	female	Connor, Warner
Sarah	11	white	female	Knowles, Connor
Shameeka	11	black	female	Connor, Warner
Steve	11	Latino/white	male	Knowles, Andrews, Parker
Tampa	11	black	male	Connor, Warner
Tina	10	white	female	Lifsky, Turner

as counterfactuals to the case study classes. When students were enrolled in one of the school's least engaging classes as determined by the school-wide survey, that class served as a comparison class. In other cases, comparison classes were those that students compared to the case study class in some organic way during their interview. Collectively, these thirty-three students discussed fifteen different comparison teachers in depth, and, as shown in Table 1, they described a total of 65 different student-teacher relationships with teachers who taught a variety of subjects. Of the twenty case study and comparison teachers, nineteen were white (with Mr. Lopez being the exception). This was expected because, despite the racial diversity of its student body, Riley High School had a teaching staff in 2009 that was 95% white. Information on how each case study and comparison class scored in relation to the school-wide survey means on measures of care and understanding is presented in

Table 2: Overview of the 20 teachers discussed in student interviews and survey results for those teachers on the school-wide survey ($n = 6,842$ total reports on teachers). Teachers are listed in order from those considered most caring to those considered least caring in relation to their colleagues. Case study classes are shown in bold.

Teacher	Role in the Study	Subject Area	Care*	Understanding*	Number of Survey Respondents	Number of Interviewees
Ms. Moore	Comparison	Child Development	1.71	1.85	93	1
Ms. Sanders	Comparison	English	1.64	1.36	120	5
Ms. Wilson	Comparison	Geometry	1.38	0.87	75	2
Mr. Lifsky	Case Study	History	1.30	0.73	107	6
Ms. Andrews	Comparison	English	0.65	1.05	79	3
Mr. Knowles	Case Study	Physics	0.62	0.54	108	8
Ms. Parker	Comparison	History	0.56	0.24	117	2
Ms. Jenkins	Comparison	Algebra 2	0.30	-0.47	95	1
Ms. Warner	Case Study	Physics	0.17	0.05	96	10
Ms. Ingels	Case Study	Biology	0.15	-0.25	101	7
Coach Connor	Case Study	English	0.12	0.21	65	8
Mr. Lopez	Comparison	Spanish	0.05	-0.35	100	1
Ms. Roman	Comparison	Art	-0.38	-0.70	96	1
Mr. Scott	Comparison	Geography	-0.40	-0.57	136	2
Coach McCoy	Comparison	Biology	-0.41	-0.32	59	1
Ms. Dexter	Comparison	English	-0.57	-0.48	112	5
Mr. Turner	Comparison	Chemistry	-0.91	-0.97	98	2
Mr. Roller	Comparison	Geometry	-0.98	-0.77	117	1
Mr. Brown	Comparison	Algebra 2	-1.20	-1.51	79	1
Mr. Newman	Comparison	English	-1.46	-1.38	98	1
Ms. Evans	Comparison	Speech	-2.29	-1.90	68	1

*Using compilation scores for all students who reported on each teacher, values denote the distance (measured in standard deviation units) above or below the mean for that measure among 97 teachers. The survey questions were “How much do you feel like this teacher cares about you?” and “How much do you feel like this teacher understands who you really are?”

Table 2 to illustrate that interviews covered classes with varying levels of perceived teacher care and understanding and in a wide variety of subject areas.

Data Collection

Student interviews were conducted during March and May 2010 and were held during the school day in a conference room in the main office. The interviews took from forty to sixty minutes and were recorded and transcribed. The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol during which students described their perceptions of their case study teachers and their teaching in great detail; there was particular emphasis on constructs such as opinions of teachers, perceived teacher care and understanding, perceived relevance of curriculum, experiences with teaching methods, academic rigor, and academic press. In discussing comparison classes, students were asked a subset of the questions about the case study class. In this study, we draw primarily on the portions of the interviews in which students discussed their relationships with teachers (see the interview protocol in the appendix). The first author also observed each of the five case study classes for five or six 90-minute class periods in the spring of 2010 to develop a stronger understanding of the contexts that students described. During observations, the researcher took field notes recording the class activities and paid close attention to teacher-student interactions and behavioral engagement among the interviewees. Finally, interviews were conducted with the

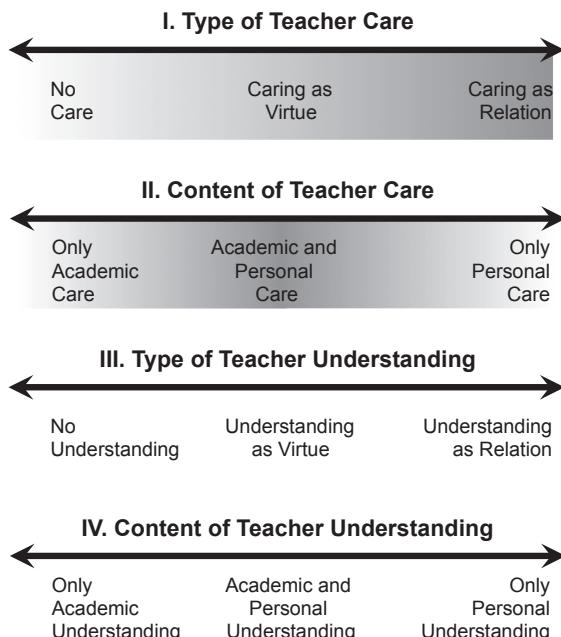
five case-study teachers and three school administrators to collect additional information on the school and classroom contexts.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the student interview data, we began by coding the thirty-three transcripts in three iterations. First, we coded for descriptive codes denoting the topics of discussion, enabling us to isolate students' comments relevant to teacher care and understanding. Then, we used two forms of interpretive codes – those representing the theoretical framework constructs and those representing our emergent understandings of students' experiences and perspectives in regards to teacher care and understanding not captured by the theoretical codes. Finally, we identified patterns in the interpretive coding that seemed to transcend individual student experiences and which became the foundation of our findings. We created definitions for each of these codes and then coded the data for these pattern codes (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Through all three coding phases – but particularly while creating and assigning interpretive codes – we tracked themes and trends that occurred across students through memos and annotations recording our raw thoughts and ideas (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990, 2002).

From our memos and theoretical framework, we created a four-tier typology to organize students' perceptions of care and understanding (see Figure 1). We then considered each student's perception of each relationship as an individual unit of analysis, and we classified those perceptions using the four tiers. In each instance, we first identified the perceived type of teacher care as no care, caring as virtue, or caring as relation (Panel I of Figure 1). If students described both virtuous and relational care, we classified that case as relational because, as the most positive type of care in Noddings' (1992) framework, we theorized that caring as relation subsumed caring

Figure 1: Variations in student perceptions of teacher care and understanding. Darker shading denotes the most positive type and content of teacher care, as outlined in the theoretical framework and supported by the data.



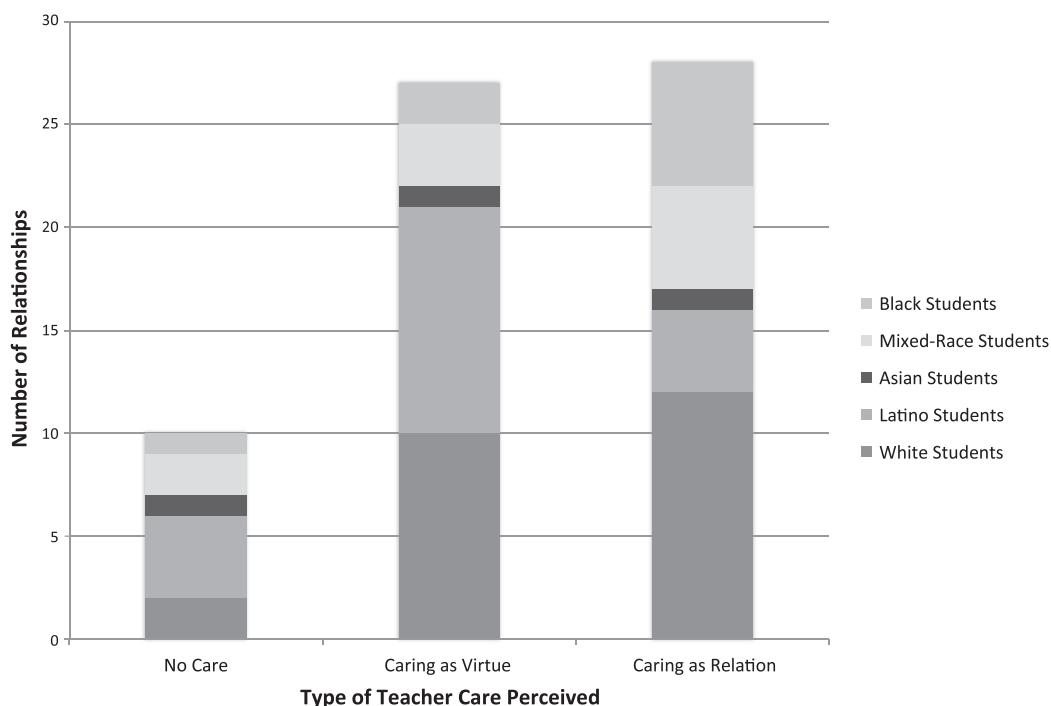
as virtue. If we determined that a student perceived care, we then classified the content as academic, personal, or both (Panel II). We repeated these analyses for the student's perception of teacher understanding (Panels III and IV). When insufficient data was available for us to classify a student's perception of a particular relationship in regards to care or understanding, we omitted that relationship from our analysis of that concept.

Once we had classified students' perceptions of caring and understanding in the sixty-five relationships on which we had sufficient data, we then used our interview, survey, and classroom observation data to analyze and describe the differences in students' experiences across the various classifications. These additional lenses on the dynamics of the classrooms and interactions between the students and teachers enabled us to develop a fuller picture of how students and teachers interact in ways that students perceive as conveying care and understanding. In a final analytic step, we charted the relative frequencies of each of our classifications to examine broad trends in the experiences of our sample and trends across the various racial and ethnic groups represented by these thirty-three students. Although we realized these trends were not generalizable, they enabled us to consider whether any demographic patterns existed in this particular sample.

Findings

In alignment with Noddings' (2005) theory, we found that students *did* describe relationships with teachers that reflected virtuous and relational conceptions of care. Figure 2 shows that we classified twenty-seven student-teacher relationships as representing caring as virtue and twenty-eight as representing caring as relation. Students also perceived no care from teachers in ten relationships. Although our sample was

Figure 2: Frequency of student-teacher relationships of each type of teacher care from the student's perspective, disaggregated by race and ethnicity (n = 65 relationships).



not random – and provides no insight into the frequency of each type of relationship in the general population – the sizable sample of virtuous and relational caring relationships enabled us to compare students' perceptions across types. Below we describe these three types of relationships – non-caring, virtuous caring, and relational caring – and analyze the content of those relationships in regards to personal and academic care. We then look at the varying conceptions of teacher understanding in virtuous caring and relational caring relationships. Across these analyses, we draw attention to the teacher actions and dispositions that lead students to draw conclusions about the nature of those relationships, and we reveal students' sense of agency in regards to the nature of interpersonal understanding that they grant to teachers.

Variations in Caring Relationships

In most cases, we found that the relationships students perceived as non-caring contained *both* an interpersonal distance between the student and teacher *and* something about the class or teacher that frustrated the student. Generally, students credited interpersonally distant teachers with at least being 'a caring person' (virtuous caring) if the teacher was likeable and the class was satisfactory. But when students were dissatisfied, they typically interpreted the lack of personal connection as a lack of care. Some students revealed disdain as they complained about teachers whose classes they felt lacked rigor. Roberto, for example, stated of his advanced biology class, "I'm mad that the work is so boring and so easy... I think it's something a third-grader should be doing half the time." Later, Roberto had the following exchange with the interviewer when discussing his relationship with his biology teacher Ms. Ingels:

Interviewer: Do you think she cares about you?

Roberto: Aren't they supposed to?

Interviewer: I don't know. Even if they are supposed to, they don't necessarily.

Roberto: I can't say she does, and I can't say she doesn't. I wouldn't really know.

Roberto's distancing language – initially referring to teachers collectively as "they" rather than responding to the question about Ingels specifically – underscored the impersonal, disconnected nature of the relationship and Roberto's frustration with Ingels' "boring" and "easy" assignments. Other students expressed frustration with teachers who were unavailable for help, interpreting inaccessibility as a lack of care. Belinda contrasted her perception of Ingels as being caring because "she tries to help everybody" with other teachers who "just show you how to do it and then sit down and do other stuff." Some students described teachers who left students unattended or were blatantly disrespectful, both of which they viewed as uncaring. In all of these instances, when students perceived a lack of care, they spoke unfavorably about the teacher and reported negative academic experiences in their classes.

Distinct from non-caring relationships, students often credited interpersonally distant teachers with having 'caring as virtue' if that teacher was agreeable and the class satisfactory. For example, when asked whether his physics teacher Ms. Warner cared about him, Javier responded, "She's like a really caring person. I mean she runs the food drives and all that stuff." Such responses represent Noddings' (2005) conception of caring as virtue rather than relation because they identify a trait of the teacher rather than an experience with the teacher. We found that virtuously caring relationships were best defined by what they were *not*. They were those relationships in which students were *not* frustrated by the class or the teacher but also did *not* experience individual feelings of being cared for by the teacher. In most cases, students who described virtuous care seemed to feel like part of a collective. For example, Roxana said of Ingels, "I think she cares about everybody in the aspect of the class, and she

tries to make sure we understand stuff and learn.” In many cases, teachers whom students perceived as having collective, rather than individual, relationships with students were those who primarily stood at the front of the room and addressed the class as whole rather than engaging in individual conversations. This type of interaction was particularly common in Coach Connor’s English class, one of the case study classes, where five out of eight interviewees described virtuous care through collective experiences with Connor and where our observations captured many instances of Connor leading whole class discussions with few one-on-one exchanges. Sarah described how such collective interactions were a less significant form of teacher care:

Interviewer: Do you think he cares about you?

Sarah: Um, yeah... Not as much as the other teachers, but...

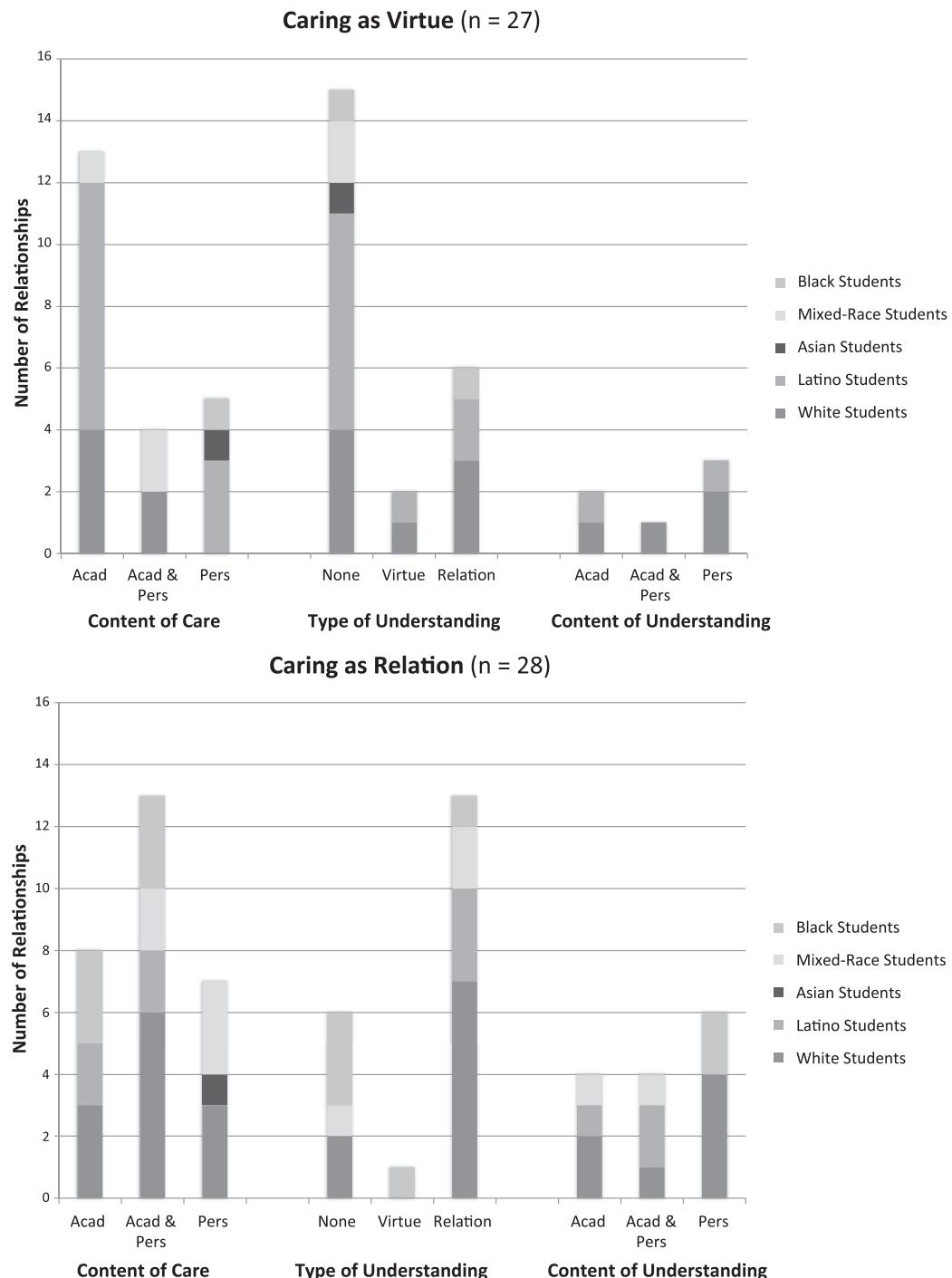
Interviewer: What does he do that makes you realize he cares a little less than other teachers?

Sarah: He just, like, in the classroom he’ll get up there and he’ll teach and then he’ll just go back and sit down. Like not [interact] as much as like the other teachers do really.

When asked if they believed Connor cared about them, two students inferred that he cared based on their general expectations of teachers. Kiana explained, “Well, all I can say is he’s a teacher. I mean if he didn’t care, he wouldn’t be a teacher.” Unlike instances of ‘no care,’ perceptions of virtuous care seemed to represent students’ generally positive impressions of Connor, whom they described as “funny,” “cool,” “relaxed,” and “one of the nicest teachers.” In such ‘caring as virtue’ relationships, students mostly perceived that teachers cared about them academically – as shown in the top panel of Figure 3 (see the left-most set of 3 bars).

Critically, when students could cite a particular instance or series of caring exchanges in which they felt the teacher *singled them out specifically* and offered a gesture of individually directed care, students described caring as relation, which we found to be the most positive and meaningful for students (see the shading in Panel I of Figure 1). In the twenty-eight relationships we classified as caring as relation, students experienced what Noddings (2005) described as being the ‘cared-for.’ In such instances, teachers addressed students directly and individually during class, asked after students who seemed upset, called on students to assist with demonstrations, pulled students out of class to encourage them to work harder, and offered students opportunities to catch up if they were falling behind. On the whole, classes in which students reported such individual gestures were generally perceived as more positive learning environments and were often the classes of which students spoke most fondly. Among the five case study teachers, Mr. Lifsky had the highest school-wide ratings on teacher care, and interviews revealed his keen attention to students as individuals. Mike, for instance, described how he knew Lifsky cared for him: “Because if I mess up on a paper, he’ll actually be disappointed and say, ‘You really need to step this up.’” He further noted, “It’s gonna inspire you to work harder if the teacher cares.” Observation notes from Lifsky’s class illustrated how he reached out to individual students almost continually. In contrast with Connor, who primarily interacted with students collectively, Lifsky repeatedly addressed individual students – inquiring about their wellbeing and asking after them and their siblings whom he also knew. Chris described of Lifsky, “He’s outstanding when it comes to caring about your work and all that and caring about you, and he’s always motivating students to do better.” Chris’s comment illuminates an individually directed experience of care rather than one geared toward the collective.

Figure 3: Frequency of student-teacher relationships by the content of care, the type of understanding, and the content of understanding, from the student's perspective, disaggregated by the type of teacher care and by student race and ethnicity ($n = 55$ relationships).



As shown in the bottom panel of Figure 3 (left-most set of 3 bars), we found that in the more personal, caring-as-relation relationships students more often perceived the content of those relationships to be both academic and personal. This integration of multiple dimensions of caring represented the most desirable type of teacher care for most interviewees, and students usually experienced both forms of care in classes they found most engaging (see the shading in Panel II of Figure 1). The power of caring along both dimensions was evident in Jack's relationship with his English teacher Ms. Andrews. Jack described the personal care he sensed from Andrews: "It's just like the vibes. Like if you're having a bad day, she'll just kind of sense it, and she'll come over there and talk to you to see how you have been and all that, you know... She seems more like, not a friend, but more of a person than a teacher." Jack further described how Andrews' care had an academic dimension: "She cares about your grades, and she'll come up to you and ask you, 'What's the problem? Do you want to go in for tutoring? Do you want to do this? Do you want to do that?' That's a teacher who actually cares." Jack also indicated his high level of engagement in Andrews' class through numerous positive comments and by describing, "She asked for like a 3-page paper once... I ended up writing like 15 or 16 pages... She said it was pretty good and she said I should write a book about it." Jack's willingness to go above and beyond the class expectations suggests a connection between teacher care, a positive learning environment, and classroom engagement.

Understanding in Different Types of Caring Student-Teacher Relationships

We found stark differences in how students perceived teacher understanding across the two sets of relationships. As shown in Figure 3 (the middle sets of 3 bars in each panel), students largely believed that teachers whom they saw as virtuously caring were those whom they perceived did not understand them. By contrast, those teachers whom students perceived to exhibit relational caring were often the teachers whom they believed understood them relationally as well. This empirical evidence supports Noddings' (2005) assertion that the more positive form of caring as relation includes teachers understanding students as individuals. However, this was not uniformly the case, and many students exhibited a strong sense of agency over the extent to which they allowed teachers to get to know and understand them. Below we unpack these variations in understanding.

In the 'caring as virtue' relationships, perceptions of understanding were mostly – although not exclusively – missing. Above we demonstrated that virtuous caring relationships often contained an interpersonal distance and a collective experience on the part of students. Not surprisingly then, a lack of personal communication and interaction was common in such relationships and limited the capacity of teachers to develop understanding of students. In a representative quote, Pete said of Knowles, "He don't know me... cause he don't talk to me, he don't hang out with me, he doesn't know my family." The lack of individual conversations made students feel like teachers did not understand them. Such interpretations are logical and illustrate the interpersonal limitations of the collectively oriented teaching practices of caring as virtue.

In six cases, however, students describe 'caring as virtue' with 'understanding as relation,' thereby countering the expectation that teachers getting to know students necessarily accompanies greater caring. Interestingly, five of these six cases included highly extroverted students whom we observed as being outspoken in class discussions and interactions with their teachers. In interviews, these students described themselves as expressive and open, such that they felt teachers knew who they were because they put themselves on display. Ana, for example, considered herself "fun and outgoing,"

and she asserted, “I have a big mouth and talk a lot... I hate being closed in. I like getting things off my chest. I like being myself so I can’t be quiet.” When asked if she felt her physics teacher Ms. Warner understood her, Ana replied, “Yeah... because everybody in the class acts like themselves, like really like themselves.” Mia similarly described of herself, “I’m not boring or shy... I talk to people without knowing them.” As one of the most vocal students in Connor’s English class, Mia did not hesitate to presume that Conner – and all of her other teachers – understood her. When asked whether she thought any of her teachers did not understand her, Mia quickly replied, “No.” Yet, Mia made it clear during her interview that she did not seek or value relationships with teachers. Of her teachers, Mia remarked, “I want them to have a good impression, but like what they think I don’t really care.” In these instances, students took responsibility for making themselves easy for teachers to get to know, thereby taking ownership of the level of understanding they granted teachers, regardless of the fact that they did not perceive relational care.

In contrast to virtuously caring relationships, relationally caring relationships were much more likely to include understanding as relation, such that students described the teacher as both caring for and understanding them individually. Such relationships seemed the most positive and influential for students. One illustrative example was Ray’s relationship with his physics teacher, Mr. Knowles. A classmate noted that Ray was different with Knowles as compared with other teachers:

[Ray is] not very good outside of school. I know he gets in a lot of trouble. His family used to be friends with my family. And I know he’s into a bunch of bad things and stuff, and I noticed like one day – it was towards the beginning of the year – he was actually paying attention in class, which is weird. I mean sometimes he’ll still sleep in there, but he’s not rude to Mr. Knowles like he is with most other teachers – like, he’ll back talk. But I think it’s a respect thing that Mr. Knowles gives.

During his interview, Ray confirmed that he was into the types of “bad things” referenced – using drugs, getting into trouble with the police, fighting, and talking back to teachers. Ray also exhibited a generally tough demeanor, peppering his interview with comments like, “I’m mean. I’m mean. I’m hateful sometimes.” But, in Knowles’ class, the positive, mutually respectful relationship the two shared was clear as they often engaged in friendly chatter and Knowles integrated Ray into numerous classroom activities and experiments. There was also evidence that Knowles understood Ray’s personal life. The following field notes captured this:

Knowles directs the class to page 751 in the textbook... All but one student start on the problem. Ray, in the back, is asleep with his head on his book. Knowles walks over to Ray, shaking his head on the way. He leans down and whispers something to him. Ray sits up... Knowles tells me after class that Ray works nights from 11pm to 4am to help his family pay the rent.

Reflecting the impact of such care and understanding, Ray described his impression of Knowles: “He acts like you’re real people. He talks to you. If you have problems, he’ll talk to you about it, you know.” In demonstrating his genuine nature and a willingness to talk with Ray, Knowles bonded with Ray in a way that other teachers did not, making Ray’s relationally caring and understanding experiences with Knowles uncharacteristically positive.

Although relational caring was most often accompanied by relational understanding, there were six cases in which students experienced relational caring but no understanding. These appeared to be cases where students either did not open themselves

up to teachers or where they perceived that they had sent the teacher mixed messages about who they were. Arielle, for example, did not believe Lifsky understood her because “we’ve never talked about me as a person, just kind of like school stuff.” She said she would not want to talk to Lifsky about herself and as rationale explained, “I don’t really feel comfortable talking about myself to my teacher, cause it’s just for a year. They’re not like my friends. They’re not going to be with me for the rest of my life.” Davon described feeling that his physics teacher Ms. Warner did not understand him, and he explained, “I changed. I changed a lot... I used to always mess with her last year.” Suggesting that he had perhaps matured in the last year, Davon did not feel that Warner knew who he was at this time. Similar to the six trend-breakers above, who experienced relational understanding amidst caring as virtue, these six trend-breakers also displayed a strong sense of agency in the extent to which they allowed teachers to get to know them. However, their sense of agency led them to behave in the opposite way. Whereas the first group abundantly shared themselves with teachers because that was their personality type, this group predominantly hid themselves from their teachers because that was their personality. Critically, these two groups of students illustrate the strong role that student agency plays in shaping student-teacher relationships.

Across all fifty-five caring relationships, there were only three cases in which students described understanding as virtue, such that they considered a teacher to be “understanding” by nature but not necessarily understanding of them in particular. As with virtuous care, students experienced virtuous understanding as a collective such that teachers’ gestures of understanding were geared toward students as groups, not as individual members of those groups. For example, Shameeka described of Coach Connor, “He understands us... Like he gets where we’re coming from... When we have our discussions in class, he can relate to what we’re talking about.” Observations revealed Connor’s familiarity with youth culture and his ability to compare issues in literature to modern youth icons and events. Mike similarly sensed that his world history teacher Mr. Lifsky understood the challenges teenagers faced because of his own turbulent childhood. Mike explained, “I think he gets all of us. I mean, like he messed up a lot in classes when he was younger, and he knows that, he knows what a teenager likes. I mean he acts like he was a teenager once.”

Variations in the Content of Understanding in Different Types of Caring Student-Teacher Relationships

The right-most bars in both panels of Figure 3 show that, in relationships where students perceived some degree of understanding, personal understanding was slightly more common regardless of the type of care perceived. In total, nine students described solely personal understanding in which they perceived the teacher knew who they were. We found that communication played a key role in teachers learning about students as people – particularly when teachers invited students to discuss topics outside of school. For example, Tina explained why she perceived that her chemistry teacher Mr. Turner understood her: “Because he has actually talked to me and we’ve had conversations other than about school. We’ve had conversations as friends and not just teacher-student.” Purely academic understanding occurred slightly less frequently, such that six students perceived particular teachers knew them as learners, but not beyond that. For example, Steve said of Knowles, “I don’t know if he knows the kind of people I hang out with... but I think he knows that I like to learn and everything.” Some students who described academic understanding believed teachers *could* only understand students along academic dimensions, not personal ones. For instance, Jeremy stated of Knowles, “I think he understands me because of the way I learn or apply myself toward his class.” When asked if

he thought Knowles knew who he was outside of school, Jeremy replied, “No. I doubt really if any teacher does.”

Students’ most holistic experiences with teacher understanding were those that evidenced both academic and personal understanding. In looking across such cases, the factors that seemed to contribute to these relationships were students opening themselves up to teachers they trusted – often because the teacher expressed interest in the student – and teachers developing understanding of students’ temperament and personal needs through working together over multiple years. One powerful example was Roxana’s relationship with her child development teacher Ms. Moore, which developed when Moore read one of Roxana’s papers. Roxana reflected, “She said she was interested in me because we did a paper, and I guess I was the one that wrote the answers that really... came from the heart or something – because other people just write stuff to say yes or no. And so she [asked if I was] interested in AVID.” Roxana made herself vulnerable as a student, and she perceived that this resulted in Moore giving her more attention than she otherwise may have. Moore encouraged Roxana to consider college options through the AVID program and praised her to others. Roxana recalled Moore saying to another teacher, “Oh, look Ms. Page, there’s Roxana. She’s one of my favorite students this year. She’s real sweet and nice.” From Roxana’s perspective, her willingness to open herself up to Moore enabled Moore to learn who she was and offer her additional academic and personal support.

These examples illustrate that students in our sample perceived various types of teacher understanding. Interestingly, the interview data further suggested that many were content with this arrangement, as different students expressed different expectations or preferences for the nature of understanding in their relationships with teachers. There were some who did not *expect* their teachers to understand them. Illustrative comments included Pete’s assertion that “The only people I ask to understand me is my family and my friends and my girlfriend,” and Rachel’s reflection on whether Lifsky understood her: “I don’t think anyone does honestly – even I don’t.” These perspectives likely reflect in part the developmental state of adolescents, who are in the process of developing their identity and formulating their own understanding of who they are becoming (Erickson, 1968). Perhaps as a result, these comments offhandedly dismiss the notion that teachers should – or even could – understand students.

Other students did not question whether teachers could understand them but rather expressed a preference for not getting close with teachers. Carter noted, “I never really talk about my hobbies or who I am or anything in classes, so pretty much none of my teachers know who I am. But that’s just me. I don’t like that whole teacher-student bond thing. There’s a part where if it’s too close, it’s weird.” In such comments, students conveyed a sense of agency in deciding how well teachers would know them, and many students clearly felt in control of how personal they allowed their relationships with teachers to become. A number of students asserted that there was a critical boundary line in how close students and teachers should be—what Arielle described as, “Not too personal, but personal enough.” Tina asserted, “I think teachers should know what the student wants them to know. If I want to tell you something I want you to know, I will come up to you and ask you about it... If you try to get into the student’s business, the student will not want to talk, to do anything anymore, not want to be in your class, not anything.” There was a clear sense that – although student-teacher relationships were important to students – teachers who crossed the boundary line would earn students’ disfavor and undermine student engagement.

Ironically, many students asserted that personal levels of teacher understanding were unnecessary in the same breath in which they praised such understanding. This point is illustrated by Rubi, who stated early in her interview, “I don’t think teachers should really know about our lives.... It just doesn’t matter.” Later, Rubi and one researcher had the following exchange:

Interviewer: What do you think the ideal relationship between a teacher and student would look like?

Rubi: Just them helping them pass – and that’s it.

Interviewer: So, you don’t think that teachers and students need to be kind of friendly with each other?

Rubi: No.

Interviewer: Do you think it should be really like business and serious?

Rubi: Probably, I mean like joke around yes a bit, but not get into your life.

Interviewer: Okay. What teacher have you had at Riley High School that you think is the closest to the perfect teacher?

Rubi: (long pause) Probably Ms. Moore.

Interviewer: Ms. Moore. How?

Rubi: Because she asks about our lives sometimes. So, she’s like – she’s probably somebody that you could go talk to.

Although Rubi explicitly stated that she did not believe teachers should “really know about our lives,” she then reported that the best teacher was one who talked to students about their lives and whom she felt she could talk to. This immediate contradiction between what Rubi advocated and what she valued was common among the interviewees – suggesting that students actually valued relationships that exceeded their expectations of how well teachers should or could know them.

Importantly, despite the number of comments revealing that students felt overwhelmingly unknown by teachers, seventeen of the thirty-three interviewees claimed that teachers needed to know students to teach them. Mike stated, “I think the teacher needs to know you. I mean, he doesn’t need to know everything about you, but they need to know a little bit about you. You have to have some clue how somebody is to be able to teach them, right?” Shameeka advocated for at least a virtual type of understanding: “We need someone who understands us, not someone who doesn’t understand us... because when we’re acting up or something like that, they will understand why and we won’t always be getting in trouble in her class – like that. Because if you snap at us, nine out of ten we’re going to snap back at you.” In this regard, Shameeka illustrated her perspective that teacher understanding, much like care, was critical for positive student-teacher relationships.

Racial and Ethnic Patterns in Students’ Perceptions

The color-coding in Figure 2 illustrates that Latino students in this sample were more likely to perceive their relationships with teachers as containing either no care or caring as virtue, whereas black and mixed race students experienced more caring as relation. The experiences of white students were fairly evenly split between caring as virtue and caring as relation, but relatively few white students described experiences of no care. Critically, 80% of the non-caring relationships involved students of color, suggesting that students of color at Riley High School may have felt less connected with the primarily white staff as compared with white students. The left-most panels of Figure 3 illustrate that within caring relationships, our Latino participants overwhelmingly tended to experience academic rather than personal care, while black and white students were fairly evenly split between academic and personal care. The center panels in Figure 3 reveal that relatively few of the

students of color perceived understanding as relation. In seventeen out of twenty-six cases (65%), students of color described feeling their teachers did not understand them individually. By contrast, in our white student sample, we identified only seven out of seventeen cases (41%) in which students felt teachers did not understand them individually. Although these findings are not generalizable, we believe these trends identify a need for further research on the nature of interpersonal understanding between white high school teachers and students of color.

Discussion

Implications of Findings

In her much-cited theoretical work, Noddings (2005) proposed that students' experiences with caring in schools take two forms: *caring as virtue* and *caring as relation*, with the latter being the more authentic and meaningful. We found overwhelming empirical support for this notion in the ways students described teacher care. Virtuously caring teachers were those who were generally likeable, whose classes were satisfactory, and who tended to interact with students collectively from the front of the classroom. Students seemed willing to credit such teachers with the virtue of "being caring" on a general level – in large part because they *expected* that teachers cared about their students as a facet of the job. By contrast, relationally caring teachers tended to engage students in one-on-one interactions in which they conveyed individually directed gestures of personal and academic care that students interpreted as going above and beyond a teacher collectively caring for all students. Students tended to describe relational care from teachers in classes for which they expressed many other positive emotions and orientations. This evidence for Noddings' two types of care aligns with prior research on the importance of relatedness for student engagement (Finn, 1989; National Research Council, 2004; Rumburger, 2011; Osterman, 2010). The present study takes this work a step further by delineating the teacher actions and dispositions that distinguish students' perceptions of caring as relation from the less significant caring as virtue and from a complete absence of care.

This research also expands upon prior work by examining the nature of interpersonal understanding in different types of caring student-teacher relationships. Previously, researchers have identified understanding as a precursor to caring for another, asserting that one can only genuinely care for another person when they understand the perspective and needs of that individual (Meyeroff, 1971; Osterman, 2010; Schussler & Collins, 2006). Noddings (2005) argued that educators need to experience "motivational displacement" (p. 15) and see the world from the student's perspective in order to understand where a student is coming from and then meet his needs. Hansen (2008) further broke teacher understanding down to moral and intellectual attentiveness, which are similar to our constructs of understanding as relation and virtue. In examining the links between teacher care and understanding, we found evidence that students did perceive relational teacher understanding more frequently in relationships in which they perceived relational care. However, this was not exclusively the case, and we found that students' feelings about teacher understanding were much more complex and varied than previously considered. Whereas the majority of students asserted that teachers were supposed to care as part of their job, students were in less agreement about the appropriateness, desirability, and ideal nature of teacher understanding (thus the lack of shading to denote the most positive forms of teaching understanding in Panels III and IV in Figure 1). Many students felt that personal understanding was something they granted teachers, not something to which teachers automatically had access. In this way, students perceived a strong sense of agency in the extent to which they allowed teachers to

get to know and understand them, and there was a clear message that student-teacher relationships were co-created by both actors: the students and the teachers. Certainly, most students believed they could and should control the depth of their relationships with teachers by deciding upon the amount and nature of information they shared with teachers. Many students clearly stated that there was a healthy level of understanding they expected from teachers but that student-teacher familiarity had a clear boundary line. Other students were far less wary of teacher understanding and even professed that being understood was critical to their learning.

Of course, such variation in students' expectations and interests in teacher understanding complicates the issue for teachers who are left trying to build relationships with students, all of whom are seeking different types and depths of relationships with teachers. To this end, we do not discredit the work of prior scholars who have argued for the need for motivational displacement as a way to identify and meet the needs of students. Yet, we argue that seeking understanding as relation may not be appropriate for teachers' relationships with all students. Instead, we suggest that the degree of understanding required for teachers to experience the motivational displacement necessary to support student learning might be fulfilled by a more virtuous, collective level of understanding of adolescents as people and learners. If the options are no understanding, understanding as virtue, and understanding as relation – *and* if some students question the possibility or desirability of understanding as relation – then students might benefit from teachers demonstrating more understanding as virtue. In other words, we suggest that working toward replacing the many instances of 'no understanding' with 'understanding as virtue' would be a positive way to improve student-teacher relationships. To this end, the three instances of virtuously understanding relationships in this study are instructive and suggest two ways in which teachers can demonstrate collective understanding of students – through knowing and integrating youth culture into the classroom (as evidenced by Connor) and through demonstrating understanding of the adolescent experience (as evidenced by Lifsky). Both could be promising strategies to help teachers communicate a general level of understanding for all students and thereby offer some level of understanding for those students who do not desire understanding as relation.

Importantly, the perceived level of teacher understanding among students of color was particularly low, suggesting that there is much more that teachers in schools with predominantly white faculty need to do to connect with students of color. Latino students in particular seemed to have relationships with teachers that were quite different in type and content than other student groups. The finding that Latino students primarily experienced academic care mirrors Garza's (2009) finding that Latino students tend to describe teacher care in academic terms. We cannot know whether these patterns reflect Latino students having definitions of teacher care that are academically oriented or whether the nature of their relationships with teachers truly are more academic than personal. But given the low levels of perceived understanding among Latinos and other students of color, we cannot help but feel that white teachers at Riley High School were struggling to connect with some of their Latino, black, and mixed-race students. Although our sample was not selected randomly and is not generalizable, we suggest that teachers – particularly white teachers working in diverse high schools – consider the recommendations below as being particularly important for their interactions with students of color to ensure that they are treating all students equitably. As Ladson-Billings (1995) asserted, caring among successful teachers of students of color means not only connecting with students but also ensuring that students of color are academically prepared to succeed – a notion that encompasses both personal and academic care.

Recommendations for Teachers

Given our findings, we offer three specific recommendations for teachers seeking to enhance their relationships with students and increase student belonging. First, teachers must make personal and academic gestures of care through one-on-one – in addition to collective – interactions with students. Personal gestures of care include checking in with students if they seem upset, expressing an interest in learning about individual students and their interests, following students' extra-curricular pursuits, and acknowledging their accomplishments outside the classroom. Individual academic gestures of care include letting students know if they are behind in class and providing means for catching up, encouraging students to work harder and expressing belief in their academic abilities, and circulating and helping students during independent work time. Through a combination of these personal and academic gestures, teachers can convey their care for students as individuals. Teachers must also attend to equity in these interactions and strive to offer individual gestures of care to students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Second, teachers must use their time with students to develop understanding of students personally – *when students express a desire for such understanding*. Importantly, not all students seek a strong relationship with each teacher, but teachers must provide opportunities for students to share themselves if they so desire, and teachers must illustrate their own willingness to engage in mutually understanding relationships with students. Rubi's contradictory statements – that teachers did not need to get to know students but that her best teacher was the one who asked about students' lives – illustrate that students may not be aware of the exact nature of the student-teacher relationships that would most directly meet their needs. For this reason, we argue that teachers must make themselves available to students in ways that might exceed students' expectations. Given the differing experiences of understanding for students of different races and ethnicities, teachers may need to make greater effort to connect with students who are racially and culturally different from them. The findings also suggest that developing and conveying relational understanding rests considerably on the frequency, nature, content, and context of student-teacher communication.

Third, we believe that teachers must make greater efforts to develop and illustrate understanding as virtue. Given the capriciousness of adolescence, teachers must realize that high school students are likely to change frequently in their needs and expectations of their relationships with teachers. As such, teachers should attempt to demonstrate that they are understanding people who get what it means to be a teenager. Through such demonstrations of virtuous understanding, teachers can stand back when students feel the need to be autonomous, yet be ready to step in with relational understanding when an opening occurs and when a need is expressed. Ironically, of course, teachers must know and understand students in order to recognize those moments when they need a more interpersonal approach. However, we argue that the importance of understanding the nature of adolescence and knowing when a student needs more attention is a key reason why understanding as virtue is critically important in high school classrooms.

Recommendations for School Leaders

In addition to offering recommendations for teachers, this study also has implications for school leaders. With the increased push for personalization structures in high schools, there is the ever-present danger of expecting structural changes to generate improved student outcomes without accompanying changes in teacher practice. This begs the question of what school leaders can do to help teachers exhibit

more relational caring towards students. Importantly, the incidences of no care in our study were limited, suggesting that most teachers exhibit at least virtuous care in the classroom. Thus, the school leader's challenge is not trying to entice completely uncaring teachers to care. Rather, the challenge is helping teachers develop and express individual, relational care for students. We believe that this challenge requires the school leader to provide teachers with opportunities to develop more significant caring relationships with students. This requires that teachers know what such relationships look like and the types of behaviors that signal relational care, but also requires extended exposure to individual students – perhaps through looping with students over multiple years or through working with the same students in multiple classes to provide time and opportunity for teachers to develop a pattern of relational gestures with students. Structures providing extended time between teachers and students could be especially important for helping teachers connect with students who demonstrate low engagement or difficulty connecting with teachers. Thoughtful and intentional pairing of students and teachers who are likely to relate well over multiple years could also be fruitful. Teachers could also be encouraged *and rewarded* for developing relational caring. Classroom observation protocols could include data for teachers on the extent to which they interact one-on-one with students. Through all of these methods, leaders could support teachers in developing and demonstrating relational care.

Amidst all of these efforts, school leaders might also acknowledge the individual variations in relationships and recognize that – like in any relationship – student-teacher relationships are going to have variations based on the pairing of two unique people. In this study, although particular teachers tended to have a predominant type of care, there were variations in how different students experienced care from a given teacher. For example, of the eight students who described relationships with Coach Connor, six described virtuous caring and two described relational caring. Conversely, of the six students who discussed their relationship with Mr. Lifsky, two described virtuous care and four described relational care. In this way, although Connor tended to be more virtuous and Lifsky tended to be more relational, neither conveyed a universal type of care toward all of their students. Similarly, individual students had different types of relationships with different teachers. For example, Carter described his relationship with Ms. Ingels as not caring, his relationship with Mr. Scott as virtuously caring, and his relationship with Ms. Sanders as relationally caring. These within-teacher and within-student variations illustrate the unique nature of each student-teacher relationship as an interaction between two individuals who have distinct personalities and ways of being. Thus, school administrators need to recognize the importance of a good student-teacher match and be willing to make changes in the event of a poor match.

Recommendations for Researchers

Along with these practical implications, this study poses some important implications for research and some clear directions for future research. From a conceptual standpoint, the variations experienced by individual students and teachers in this study illustrate the need to allow for individual variation in research on school climate or student-teacher relationships. Oftentimes, researchers will ask survey or interview questions such as “Do you think your teachers care about you?” Yet, this study illustrates that such questions referring to teachers in the plural are insufficient for assessing the nature of students’ relationships with teachers because neither students nor teachers have a uniform type of relationship with everyone they meet. Similarly, future research should be careful not to conflate teacher care with teacher understanding and instead consider these as two separate constructs – particularly given the wide variation in how students think about understanding as a desirable or undesirable

facet of their relationships with teachers. In addition, we believe that the differences in perceptions of caring and understanding in relationships between high school students of color and white teachers represents a critical area of inquiry for future research, with attention to the types of gestures white teachers can make to build stronger, more understanding relationships with students of color. Finally, we posit that the role of student agency in shaping student-teacher relationships has important implications for the personalization of high schools and is thus worthy of further research.

Limitations

Although we have been careful not to over-generalize in our presentation and discussion of our findings, we feel compelled to remind readers that this study draws on the experiences of only a small group of 33 students in one Texas high school. The sample of teachers whom students discussed was even smaller – with only five case study teachers and fifteen comparison teachers. This sample limited the pool of student-teacher relationships that we could examine to the unique characteristics and interactions of these particular students and teachers, who may not be representative. In addition, nineteen of these twenty teachers were white. Given the large proportion of students of color at Riley High School who did not experience relational understanding from these twenty teachers, we feel it is critical that the constructs of teacher care and understanding be examined in other settings with different teacher and student compositions.

Conclusion

Given increasing attention to the importance of belonging and relatedness in schools (Osterman, 2010) and the hope that personalizing high schools will increase these feelings for students (Darling-Hammond, 2006), this examination of caring student-teacher relationships can help educators identify and enact strategies for improving the quality of students' experiences in schools. Through empirical examination of Noddings' (2005) theory on care, we found support for the notion that relational caring is superior to virtual caring, while also raising some new questions regarding how we conceptualize teacher understanding of students as a facet of care and the role of student agency in regulating such understanding. We believe that our findings in these two areas support the personalization structures aimed at helping teachers develop care and understanding of students as important for enhancing students' emotional experiences and attachment in school. Yet, we draw critical attention to the agency of students as co-creators of their relationships with teachers, and we suggest that understanding as virtue in particular could have considerable potential as a middle ground for teachers working with students who wish to retain some distance and autonomy from teachers. In addition, given the relative infrequency of positive experiences of care and understanding for the students of color in our sample – particularly the Latino students – we believe efforts at increasing relational care and virtuous understanding are likely to be critical for relationships among white teachers and students of color.

Endnote

1. Riley is a pseudonym, as are the names of all individuals included in the study. Identifying information about the town and the high school has been slightly altered to protect the identities of all parties involved in this research.

Acknowledgement

This research was supported through funding from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University.

References

- Altenbaugh, R. J., Engel, D. E., & Martin, D. T. (1995). *Caring for kids: A critical study of urban school leavers*. London: The Falmer Press.

- Battistich, V., Solomon, D., Watson, M., & Schaps, E. (1997). Caring school communities. *Educational Psychologist*, 32(3), 137–151.
- Baumeister, R. F. & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 479–529.
- Bosworth, K. (1995). Caring for others and being cared for: Students talk caring in school. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(9), 686–693.
- Bridgeland, J. M., Dilulio, J. J., & Morison, K. B. (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Report from Civic Enterprises.
- Certo, J. L., Cauley, K. M., & Chafin, C. (2003). Students' perspectives on their high school experience. *Adolescence*, 38(152), 705–724.
- Connell, J. P. (1990). Context, self, and action: A motivational analysis of self-system processes across the life-span. In D. Cicchetti (Ed.), *The self in transition: Infancy to childhood*, (pp. 61–97). Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Connell, J. P. & Wellborn, J. G. (1991). Competence, autonomy, and relatedness: A motivational analysis of self-system processes. In M. R. Gunnar & L. A. Sroufe (Eds.) *Self processes and development: The Minnesota symposia on child psychology*, Volume 23. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Cooper, K. S. (2012). Safe, Affirming, and Productive Spaces: Classroom Engagement Among Latina High School Students. *Urban Education*, 48(4), 490–528.
- Cooper, K. S. (2014). Eliciting Engagement in the High School Classroom: A Mixed-Methods Examination of Teaching Practices. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(4), 363–402.
- Cothran, D. J. & Ennis, C. D. (2000). Building bridges to student engagement: Communicating respect and care for students in urban high schools. *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 33(2), 106–117.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2006). No Child Left Behind and high school reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 27(4), 642–667.
- Davidson, A. L. (1999). Negotiating social differences: Youths' assessment of educators' strategies. *Urban Education*, 34(3), 338–369.
- Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban public high school*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Finn, J. D. (1989). Withdrawing from school. *Review of Educational Research*, 59(2), 117–142.
- Garrett, T., Barr, J., & Rothman, T. (2009). Perspectives on caring in the classroom: Do they vary according to ethnicity or grade level? *Adolescence*, 44(175), 505–521.
- Garza, R. (2009). Latino and white high school students' perceptions of caring behaviors: Are we culturally responsive to our students? *Urban Education*, 44(3), 297–321.
- Goodenow, C. (1993). Classroom belonging among early adolescent students: Relationships to motivation and achievement. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 13(1), 21–43.
- Hallinan, M. T. (2008). Teacher influences on students' attachment to school. *Sociology of Education*, 81, 271–283.
- Klem, A. M. & Connell, J. Pl. (2004). Relationships matter: Linking teacher support to student engagement and achievement. *Journal of School Health*, 74(7), 262–273.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(4), 465–491.
- Lofland, J. & Lofland, L. H. (1995). *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Mac Iver, M. A. (2011). The challenge of improving urban high school graduation outcomes: Findings from a randomized study of dropout prevention efforts. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 16(3), 167–184.
- Martin, A. J. & Dowson, M. (2009). Interpersonal relationships, motivation, engagement, and achievement: Yields for theory, current issues, and educational practice. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), 327–365.
- Mayeroff, M. (1971). *On caring* (Vol. 43). New York: Harper & Row.
- McClure, L., Yonezawa, S., & Jones, M. (2010). Can school structures improve teacher-student relationship? The relationship between advisory programs, personalization and students' academic achievement. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 18(17). Retrieved from <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/719>
- Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- National Research Council. (2004). *Engaging schools: Fostering high school students' motivation to learn*. Committee on Increasing High School Students' Engagement and Motivation to Learn. Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies.
- Nichols, S. L. (2008). An exploration of students' belongingness beliefs in one middle school. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 76(2), 145–169.
- Noblit, G. W. (1993). Power and caring. *American Educational Research Journal*, 30(1), 23–38.
- Noblit, G. W., Rogers, D. L., & McCadden, B. M. (1995). In the meantime: The possibilities of caring. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(9), 680–685.
- Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. Advances in Contemporary Thought, Volume 1. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Noddings, N. (2005). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education* (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Osterman, K. F. (2000). Students need for relatedness in the school community. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(3), 323–367.

The Co-Creation of Caring Student-Teacher Relationships

- Osterman, K. F. (2010). Teacher practice and students' sense of belonging. In T. Lovat, R. Toomey, & N. Clement (Eds.), *International research handbook on values education and student wellbeing*. New York: Springer Science + Business Media. (pp. 239–260).
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Roeser, R. W., Midgley, C., Urdan, T. C. (1996). Perceptions of the school psychological environment and early adolescents' psychological and behavioral functioning in school: The mediating role of goals and belonging. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 88(3), 408–422.
- Rumberger, R. W. (2011). *Dropping out: Why students drop out of high school and what can be done about it*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ryan, R. M. & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78.
- Schussler, D. L. & Collins, A. (2006). An empirical exploration of the who, what, and how of school care. *Teachers College Record*, 108(7), 1460–1495.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.



APPENDIX

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for Students (40–60 minutes)

Questions focusing on student-teacher relationships are shown in bold.

Introductory Questions

- How old are you, and what grade are you in? How long have you been going to Riley High?
- In general, do you like it here? What do you like (or not like) about it?
- What activities are you involved at school? What do you do when you're not at school?
- Who do you live with? Can you tell me a little bit about each of those people?
- If you could do absolutely anything after high school, what would you ideally want to do?
- How would you describe yourself as a student?
- What is your race and/or ethnicity?
- Do you feel like this is an important part of who you are? Why or why not?
- How do you think your friends would describe your personality?
- What do you like about yourself? What would you like to change about yourself?

Perceptions of Academic Rigor

- Let's talk about (focal class). In general, what kinds of things do you learn in this class?
- Do you think this class is hard or easy? Why?
- Do you think (teacher) thinks that the kids in your class are smart? What makes you say that?
- **Do you think (teacher) thinks you're smart? How do you know?**
- **Does (teacher) push you to work hard in class? How?**
- Are the other kids in this class smarter than you? [How do you know? Do you care?]
- Do you think (teacher) cares about the material in this class? How do you know?

Perceptions of Teaching Style

- How would you describe (teacher)'s teaching style? What kinds of things do you do in class?

- Are there many projects, games, or labs in this class? [Describe them.]
- Do you ever work in groups in this class? [What do you do? How well does that work out?]

Perceptions of Emotional Connections to the Class and Teacher

- Do you get to express your own ideas and opinions in this class? How?
- Do you think this class relates to life outside of school? How?
- Do you think that it's important for people to learn (this subject)? [Why?]
- Are you good at the work in this class? How do you know?
- **Is (teacher) the kind of teacher people like, or not really? Do you like him/her? [Why?]**
- **Do you think (teacher) cares about you? [How do you know? Do other teachers do this?]**
- **Do you think (teacher) understands who you really are as a person? [How do you know?]**

Comparison Class

- Do you think this class is hard or easy? Why?
- Are you good at the work in this class? How do you know?
- **Do you think (teacher) thinks you're smart? How do you know?**
- Do you get to express your own ideas and opinions in this class? How?
- Do you think this class relates to life outside of school? How?
- **Is (teacher) the kind of teacher people like, or not really? [Why?]**
- **Do you think he/she likes you? [Why? How do you know?]**
- **Do you think he/she cares about you? [How do you know? Do other teachers do this?]**
- **Do you think he/she understands who you really are as a person? [How do you know?]**

Copyright of High School Journal is the property of University of North Carolina Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.